

Halo: First Person Shooter

by Mister Frodo

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Summary: I wake up in a clearing with no one around and a piece of metal stuck in my leg. Whoopie. Note: This is now on PERMANENT hiatus, meaning it will most likely never be updated again. My apologies to all who read it and enjoyed it.

1. Day at the Beach

Pain.

That's the first thing I remembered when I came to. Pain in my right leg. I opened my eyes and took a deep breath.

Parts of a crashed pelican surrounded me. I wiped my eyes. My hand came back specked with blood.

I tried to stand up. Something bit into my right leg. I looked over and gasped. A piece of debris had wedged itself slightly below my knee, with dried blood encircling it. I almost screamed but stopped myself.

"Marines don't scream." I cleared some scraps away from me. "Marines yell. Marines yell orders. Marines don't scream."

I don't know why, but for some reason, talking to myself has always made me feel better. Well, actually, I'm really talking to God, but the squad thinks I'm crazy.

Maybe I am, I don't know.

I surveyed my surroundings. Large trees fenced off the clearing in which I sat. The main body of our Pelican, the UNSC standard dropship, was missing. I guessed I must have been blown away in the crash.

I tried to recall what had happened. The Sarge had called us together. We were on In Amber Clad. Weird name, I know, but the

Commander can name her ship anything she wants.

The Sarge said we were going down to the ringworld. Delta Halo, they called it. I had heard rumors of the first Halo, and of the Master Chief. I didn't believe them back then.

After Mombassa, I don't think there's much left I can't believe.

Frankie asked the question first. He wanted to know why. I like Frankie, he's a good man, but there are some things you don't ask superior officers.

"Why" is one of them.

After Sarge chewed him out, we got on the Pelican. There are six in the squad. Me, Sarge, Frankie, Jess, Al, and Kenny, who doubles as our pilot. Oh, and Cough. That's what Al calls him. He's a Helljumper. His team died in Mombassa. Our Pelican picked him up, and he's been with us since.

Why's he called Cough? Well, since he got here, he hasn't told us his name. In fact, hasn't really told us anything. We got most of the info from Polly, his only surviving squad mate. She's in the med bay with severe plasma burns.

She'll make it, though. I hope.

Anyway, the only thing Cough did was, well, cough. He seems to have gotten some smoke in his lungs or something. He almost never takes off his helmet and never talks, but I saw him in action with a rifle.

Boy, that guy can shoot.

So there we were. We were heading down with a group to come help the Master Chief. Man, I wanted to see him.

Might never get the chance now.

Then, I remember something wrong with the engine, thenâ€¦

Well, I had just woken up.

My leg hurt. Pretty bad. I couldn't move it without hurting myself. If there ever was a pickle, I was in it.

So I prayed as I thought. I mean, you may think it's crazy, but praying helps clear my head. Besides, I needed a little divine intervention about now.

I rubbed my face with the back of my sleeve. Not much blood, thankfully. Probably from a cut lip or something.

A bird whistled. I instinctively reached for my belt, where my SMG usually hung.

I sighed. Of course, of courseâ€¦

Silence filled the air. I rested in a sitting position and started

looking around for my gun.

Nothing. But a stick of metal stuck up from the rubble. I shifted over and grabbed for it.

Something moved. I paused, listening to the noise of the forest. Sudden footsteps rushed by. I held my breath.

There! Something orange flashed through the brush. I stuck my hand into the debris and pulled out the stick of metal.

A broken security latch. Just my luck.

Then, it burst from the trees.

It was small, around five feet tall I guess, with a weird triangle-shaped body. Orange armor covered it, with a mask on its mouth. Its beady little eyes took me in as it raised the small gun clutched in its hand.

I looked back at the alien. A Grunt, as they're called by us soldiers. We have other names for them, but they aren't necessarily fit to print.

It squeaked and held down the trigger. I flinched, expecting my life to end there, but stopped. A small ball of green energy grew on the alien pistol's stubble. It lit the surrounding wood with an eerie green light. I threw the latch at the alien.

The Grunt must have thought it was a weapon or something, because it dropped its gun and started screaming. I nearly slapped myself. Every single Covenant within five miles was going to know where I was.

I pulled myself forward with my hands. The Grunt stopped its cowardice and cocked its head. I grabbed the alien's discarded pistol and fired.

It took a few shots to kill the Grunt. It fell over, its armor breached. The Sarge had told us that they can't breathe air, and had to use a methane tank to survive. Once the tank was punctured, the Grunt suffocated and died.

Something to remember. I put its weird pistol on my belt. I couldn't use the gun well, but if any Covenant came around, they wouldn't find me defenseless.

My hand shuffled through the rubble, searching for a med kit. If I could find some biofoam and bandages, I could bandage my leg.

That would help.

A couple minutes later I crawled over to a tree and rested against it, empty-handed. Maybe the Sarge would come.

Hey, why should I stop there? Maybe Jesus would come back and pull me out of here. Maybe do that thing he did for Enoch, you know?

You don't know. Never mind.

So, there I was, trapped between a rock and a hard place, except the

rock was stuck in my leg. I tried moving it but just got more pain.

"You know, I wonder, what would've happened if the war never had started? Would I have gotten married? I wouldn't have signed with the armed forces, that's for sure." I kept my voice at a whisper, so as not to attract Covenant attention. "You know, I might have never become a Christian. And the chances of me sitting in a forest with a piece of metal lodged in my leg would be slimmer, too."

"Listen, Job, if you want to really complain, you have to use the whiny voice. And Sarge tells me I don't do it well. Sheesh."

I turned around. Al and Cough stood there, battle rifles ready. Al took one look of my leg and whistled.

"Whoa. Man, you got it good."

I grinned. "Hey, better to overshoot than undershoot."

"Yeah, so that does apply to more than just grocery shopping." He knelt down next to me. "Well, Job, we'll get you out of here in one piece."

Job. That's not really my name; it's just what Al calls me. After the guy in the Bible. Al's our resident jokester, always has a wise crack whether we're in the showers or on the front line. He gave me the nickname because he says I'm always positive, even when we get ourselves in some rough jams.

Had a lot of those lately.

Cough simply grunted. Al turned to him.

"Now, now, now, Cough, more talk like that, and you'll be demoted." He slid a box from his belt. "Don't have any bandages, soâ€|" He ripped off a piece of his sleeve. "Once I jerk out this thing, it's gonna hurt, so, be like yourself." His hand undid the box's lid. He withdrew a canister of biofoam and closed the pack again. "Remember this'll sting, so hang on."

He carefully wedged the metal chunk out. It wasn't in that tight, I must have loosened it when I was crawling around. Blood started to flow anew. He filled the small hole up with biofoam and covered it with the piece of cloth.

The leg stung like a thousand fire ants, and let me tell you, fire ants sting. I grinded my teeth together as the pain continued.

After a few seconds (which seemed like hours), the stinging stopped. I got to my feet, using the tree to support myself. Al helped get me standing and handed me a magnum. "Here. You need it more than I do."

I nodded. Definitely not my favorite gun, the magnum acted as a Marine's sidearm. It was underpowered, compared to the SMG or a battle rifle, but I'd take what I get.

I started walking. It hurt, and caused blood to seep through the makeshift bandage. Al sighed.

"I guess you won't be able to travel far. Me and Cough were looking for the others, and we heard the Grunt wailing. Thought it had met Jess on one of her bad days."

I grimaced as a fresh wave of pain ran through my leg. "Well, we need to find the others. Did you see any of them?"

"No." Al checked his rifle. "We got blown away from the crash. I don't know where the old bird is. Or the Pelican."

I smiled. Suddenly I realized there was a sound in the background. "Do you hear that?"

Al nodded. "Waves."

We headed in the direction of the sound. I lagged a little, but eventually we all came to rest on the edge of a cliff. I peeked over and whistled.

A _long _drop separated us from the beach below. Waves splashed on the sand. Al gasped. "Look! Over there!"

I followed his gaze to a large cluster of boulders. The shell of a Pelican rested in it, the ship's grayish-brown hull glistening in the sun. My knee gave way and I slipped.

Cough pulled me back from the edge and coughed. Several rocks crumbled away. I took a deep breath. "Do you think anyone survived that?"

"I don't know." Al wheeled around. "But if they did, they're in trouble."

I propped myself up on my elbows. "Why?"

"The tide is really low. I don't know if the same rules apply on this thing, but if the tide rises, they'll be swept under. We need to get down there."

My leg protested against moving. I ignored it and struggled to a standing position. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Wellâ€|" Al paced near the trees. "I can't leave you here, or else Covenant might get you, and if you do come with us, it'll be slowerâ€|" He stopped. "Better to hang together than to hang alone. We'll be slow, but it'll do. Come on."

I grimaced as I took a few steps. "I'll be all right. Let's go."

We followed the cliff side around. As we traveled, dark clouds moved in from the north. Al put up his hand. "Stop. We're going the wrong way."

I looked back. A steep path streaked across the distant landscape. A few kilometers, at least. Cough started to head that way, and we followed him.

Footsteps made us halt. I cocked my magnum. Al crept towards the forest, his gun at the ready. Raindrops began to fall, causing the

dirt to become mud.

Something hit me. I fell back. Cough shot at something with his rifle. I got to my feet. The bandage slid off my leg, causing fresh blood to flow.

"Oh, damn!" Al muttered, along with some other words I'd rather not print. "Cough, cover." He knelt down again and pulled out a strip of clothing from his belt. "I made another one just in case."

My leg wound stung more than ever as he bandaged it again. Biofoam leaked out onto my wet skin. He helped me up.

I gritted my teeth. You know, there are some times when I think everything's gone wrong. Where any possible thing has turned for the worse.

This was one of those times.

Al gripped his rifle tighter. "On three, we run. 1â€|2â€|3!"

We bolted. Actually, Al and Cough bolted. My leg gave way and I slipped into the mud. Al spun around and swore.

Then the earth shook. Again. And again. Almost likeâ€!

Footsteps!

I rolled around to see two Hunters staring at me.

Hunters are the Covenant's heavy artillery. They have thick armor, complete with a large metal shield attached to one arm. Their other arm ends in a fuel-rod cannon, perfect for blasting away Marines. Three long spines rise from their backs. They seem almost impervious at first glance, but two small patches of orange skin, on the backs and in their heads, can be shot to damage it. Of course, this observation was made after two of the aliens killed about a hundred Marines.

They always stay in pairs. And they don't seem to have any eyes or ears, or mouth, or nose, either. So I don't know if it was really staring at me.

Its head was turned towards me, though. It roared.

_Pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop-pop! _Two bursts of battle rifle fire struck the Hunter's soft belly. The alien moved its shield to cover the exposed area, but too late. I wheeled my head around to see Cough, firing his gun with efficiency. And coughing, of course.

Al joined in too, and the first Hunter fell. The second bellowed and charged at Al. He froze, and for a second or two I thought his life had ended.

Then he rolled out of the way. The enraged alien raced over the cliff. Al peeked over and grimaced. "Ouch. Well, he deserves it."

I got to my feet. My right leg shook and almost gave way again. "What knocked me down?"

"Plasma grenade. Some Grunt threw it." Al helped steady me. "We need to move, but if you're injuredâ€|"

"Leave me." I don't know why I said those words. They just popped into my mind. I probably was trying to be heroic, like in those old movies.

I didn't feel very heroic when I said it.

"No." Al shook his head. "I'm not leaving you here."

"Sarge wouldâ€"

"I'm not Sarge, Josh!"

I nearly fell over at his words. "Sorry."

He sighed. "Yeah, well, I am too. Listen, I don't care what happens, I am not going to survive and let you die. I'll die with you before I let that happen. I'll die for you before I let that happen." He stared right at me. "We're going. All three of us."

You see, you never really know someone until you're on the battlefield. Here Al, the relative jokester, having to assume leadership because of my leg and Cough'sâ€|cough, I guess. He didn't want to leave me, but he had more chance of surviving if he just went on without me.

I don't know what was going on in his mind, but it didn't seem to be something he did every day. He was the leader, the boss. And with that great power comes a great responsibility for his men.

Enough sentimental. The rain picked up, coming down in torrents. I followed the outline of Al's back. The water kept me from seeing things except with a yard or two.

We headed across the cliff side. Al almost slipped over the edge once or twice. But after about twenty minutes, the heavy rain started to lighten up.

Birds chirped. The sun shown through the clouds, lighting the woods. My mood lightened as well.

Plasma fire tore through the serenity, knocking me flat. I cried in pain as fresh mud found its way into my wound. Gunfire echoed in my ears again. Someone else cried out.

I rolled over and looked up. A blue-clad alien stood directly above me, a plasma rifle in its hand. It was shooting at the others and I guess it didn't see me.

The alien's shield flashed. I pointed my magnum up and pulled the trigger.

Bang! The alien yelled and fell over. Purple blood flowed onto my face. I spat it out and turned away.

Al helped me up. "Well, and I thought that thing was only for looks. Guess that Elite didn't have the guts to deal with you, eh, Job?"

I furrowed my brow and looked down. A string of intestines stuck to my stomach.

"Gawh!" I jumped up about three feet straight into the air, leg wound forgotten. Now, remember, you should never swear, and if you ever do, never take the Lord's name in vain.

That time, I only followed the second rule.

Al chuckled and wiped my shirt off. "Wow, Job, I thought you were supposed to be Mr. Pure. Even I don't use that bad of language."

"Very funny, Mister Comedian. Notice none of my words started with an 'f' or an 's'. If you think I was cussing, listen to yourself."

"Well, I never cuss, I just increase everyone's vocabulary." He knelt down. "Okay, if you make me kneel in this mud one more time, I will break your leg off. That way, you won't have to worry about the wound anymore. Of course, that would slow us down even more, soâ€œ!" He withdrew the biofoam and another strip of clothing from his pants. "We're going to be going with only our boxing briefs if you keep this up, Job."

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. The stinging returned, this time worse. I gritted my teeth as the pain started to subside.

Al stood and grinned. "There, good as new." His smile faded. "We better keep going. The Covenant doesn't just drop scouting parties on their own. I expect at least another squad around here somewhere."

I nodded. You see, the Covenant has its own combat hierarchy. At the bottom are Grunts. They, like the one I encountered earlier, are complete cowards. Pretty much cannon fodder, though they can be dangerous in large numbers. And next come Drones. They're like giant insects. They carry the ability to fly, which gives them the advantage in aerial combat. Nasty little buggers. Anyway, they're a little like Grunts: Weak alone, dangerous together. Next come Jackals. Like Grunts, they are a common part of the Covenant forces. They're weak, but help their chances of survival with energy shields on their right wrists. Some will even carry a type of sniper rifle. Excluding the snipers, all three of these aliens usually wield plasma pistols and needlers.

On the next rung is the Hunter. After that comes the Elite. Elites are great warriors; they can command their troops with tactical genius and back it up with brawn on the battlefield. They can carry almost every weapon the Covenant has, not all at once, of course. To assist their already strong bodies, they have suits of armor with a built-in energy shield. The shield shimmers around them, protecting them from the brunt of the blow. Once the Elite has its shield down, it can be killed.

But enough talk on aliens. Cough had already started ahead of me and Al. I hobbled forward. My leg felt stiff and hurt with every step I took. But I trudged on after the others, regardless.

After about another fifteen minutes, we hadn't seen any Covenant

contact. The pathway down to the beach still seemed just as far away as when we started. I grimaced as my injury throbbed. Al whispered something in Cough's ear (at least, I think that's where his ear is) and fell back next to me.

"Hey." He kept his voice low. "Keep walking. When I snap my fingers, turn around and fire at anything that moves. And something will be moving. Oh, and don't look back yet."

I raised my eyebrows but didn't turn around. I could guess what was behind us.

Al snapped his fingers. I wheeled around and unloaded my pistol's clip.

Three Grunts and a Jackal walked behind us. My first four shots took out two of them. A couple rounds of battle rifle fire hit the Jackal in the neck, and another round simultaneously killed the last Grunt.

We ran away from the battle. Al fired a couple shots over his shoulder. Something yelled. I twisted my head to see what trailed us.

Apparently I went too far, because I tripped and fell on the ground. A large purple needle hit the ground right next to my head. I rolled away as more needles flew at me.

Someone's rifle coughed. A thud followed. I rose to a knee and looked back.

An Elite lay dead on the ground. It clutched a needler in its lifeless hand. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Two hands grabbed my arms and hoisted me up. "Let's move, Job."

I hobbled after the others. Still a while to go to the beach, and with the Covenant closing inâ€!

We passed by an opening in the trees. I gasped. A large, square temple stood in the clearing. It had a foreign architecture, one I'd never seen before.

Al whistled. "Wow. Talk about fast. Those Covenant sure know how to build."

I frowned. "No way Covenant built this. And if the Covenant built it, they'd be here, anyway."

"We don't know how long the Covenant has been on this ring."

I grimaced as a fresh wave of pain washed over my leg. "But, I really, really don't want to get into a real estate argument right now. Let's just go."

Al nodded. So, there we went, three Marines stranded on some weird ring, trying to save our squad. If there was still a squad to save.

A big if.

After another thirty minutes, we had crossed about half of the distance. Al's shoulders slumped. "Never gonna make it at this rate. Any ideas?"

"Leave me." I shut my eyes as the umpteenth wave of pain coursed through my leg. "You two can make it if I'm not here."

"Listen, we have about three kilometers left. It took us almost an hour to get here. I don't think the tide will rise anytime soon, so that would mean around another hour getting from where we started to the beach. By that time, the Covenant already has us dead, and the rest of the squad can't mourn our deaths because they're already dead themselves. What a pleasant situation we're in." He shrugged. "But hey, that's life."

Cough stared into the brush. I followed his gaze andâ€¢

My jaw dropped. Al looked at me. "What?"

"I think we can make it in less than an hour. Definitely."

"Whaâ€?" He trailed off as he caught sight of them. "Well cover me with feathers and call me a canary."

Resting in the trees, their purple armor glistening in the sun, were three Covenant Ghosts.

I sat in one of the purple hovercraft, staring in awe at the foreign controls in front of me. They had covered Ghosts in basic, but I'd never thought that I'd actually be controlling one.

Luckily, Al did.

"Alright, this handle thingy is the throttle. Push it forward and go faster, pull it and you'll slow down. Turn it left and right to go to the direction specified. And this thingy lets you control the cannons with your left hand." He looked back at me and Cough. "Looks like the Covenant added a boost to this thing. Press in the orb thing with your left hand if you want to. Can't use the guns while you're boosting, though."

I nodded and studied the controls. A handle with alien text written by it rested on the right side. I grabbed it and pushed slightly.

The Ghost shot forward, shoving Al's vehicle into a spin. I pulled back on the throttle and hit Cough's Ghost, sending him twirling as well.

Al shook his head. "Okay, maybe we should drive this thing away from the cliffs."

After a few minutes in which we went over the throttle and the cannons (and scorched some bird dumb enough to land near us), we moved out. The forest offered cover from any snipers, and still enough room for us to drive without having to get too close to the cliff.

We did the distance in about a fifth of the time it would have taken us on foot.

A narrow pathway extended from the cliff to the beach. Al got out of his Ghost and looked it over. "Dang, too small. We're gonna have to leave the Ghosts."

I nodded. Cough cleared his throat and descended from his vehicle. I followed him and was about to start walking when my right leg hit the ground. It gave way and I collapsed.

Let me tell you, whoever built Halo really had good taste in grass. Guess they used some pretty good fertilizer, too. And the dirt's not that bad, either.

Al pulled me up. "Damn me, Josh! I forgot about your leg getting stiff. Crud!" He kicked the dirt. "Well, I'll help you. Let's just get down there."

There we went, Al helping me along in the front with Cough covering our six. I silently prayed a simple thank you. We'd made it! We had finally made it!

The Pelican rested about another ten or twelve meters in front of us. I tested my leg and found it a bit sturdier. "Al, I can make it."

He let go. "If you're sure, Dr. Job."

That brought a smile out of me. We hurried forward. I nearly kept up with them, my leg feeling better every second.

We reached the Pelican and stopped. The Pelican was lying in the sand, belly-first. A small hole between the Pelican and the ground led to the cockpit. I couldn't see the inside at all.

Al knelt down and peeked inside. "Shoot. There's blood, andâ€|" he trailed off. "Um, I'll crawl in; see if there are any survivors."

I bit my lip as Al entered the wrecked dropship. I could already guess what he would find.

He came out, face grim. A couple of SMGs hung from his belt, along with a frag grenade and several ammo clips. "There was no one alive in there." He sat down in the sand. "But only two bodies. The others must be somewhere else."

I looked up, hope starting to stir. Then it died a little. "Who was in there?"

"Kennyâ€|" He dug out a canteen from his pack. "And Frank."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Sarge had told us people would die. I should've known, after what happened in Mombassa. But I just pushed it to the back of my mind, like everything else about death.

I could only hope that they were in Heaven now. Better than where we were, that's for sure.

A sudden whine brought me out of my thoughts. It grew louder, like it

was getting closerâ€|

Al shoved me out of the way as a Ghost came barreling in, nearly taking us all out. I dived into the Pelican, shortly followed by the others.

Two dead bodies sat in the corner. I tried not to look at them as plasma scorched the sand near my feet.

Al swore. "I should've sent the Ghosts over the cliff, I didn't think the Covenant wouldâ€""

A plasma grenade landed next to my foot. We clambered into the cockpit as the grenade exploded, filling the air with sand and dust. I took a deep breath as footsteps approached.

Al crept forward, an SMG in each hand. "Time to eat lead, Covenant buggers," he muttered.

I took up his discarded battle rifle. Live or die, we were about to send the Covenant a message: Marines don't give up without a fight.

2. Prelude

(This is a prelude to the first chapter, about the main character's battle on Tampa Station. Sorry if it gets confusing, and I don't know if you'll like it as much as the last one, but please: read on.)

"Hey, private!"

I froze. _Oh, great. I get Sarge when he's angry. _I turned around, trying to smile as I did. "Yes, sir?"

He stood in the hall, a fearsome sight. Two hundred five pounds of alien-killing Marine. He frowned. "What the hell are you doing, Marine?"

"Umâ€|" I slid the SMG behind my back. "Nothing, sir."

"Don't lie, Marine, or I'll put you on a flight all the way to Reach." He stepped into the room. "I repeat: What are you doing?"

"Justâ€|" I sighed. "I was trying to adjust my SMG, give it a better range, sir. I know you said we shouldn't tamper with our weapons, butâ€|"

"Sorry, Josh, but it is standard UNSC policy." He shrugged. "I'm gonna need your gun. Leave the modifications to the techies."

I nodded and handed him the weapon. "Any news from Command, sir? I heard that the Covenant is going to attack."

"We don't know for sure, private." He clipped my SMG to his belt. "Alright, I'm heading up to Computer L-04. If you have a problem, contact me there."

"Yes, sir." I watched him leave. Nothing to do.

My room didn't offer much comfort. Just dozens of small bunk beds and a small pull-out desk. I stood and stretched. Better head to the Armory.

I headed towards the hallway. We'd just gotten back from patrol duty at New York City, and I still had my uniform on. I passed other Marines, some in uniform, some not, others in dress suits. No one really of importance, just Marines either patrolling or wandering around, like me.

Life on Tampa Station gets boring sometimes.

I walked into one of the computer rooms. A techie sat at the console, typing in some code. I passed him and headed down the stairwell. The rec room stood before me. I leaned onto the stairwell, lost in thought.

What if the Covenant did attack? We wouldn't stand much of a chance against a huge armada, that was for sure. Maybe some of the crew would be able to escape to Earth, but only non-military personnel. That meant if we were attacked, the only way I'd survive was if we won.

A big if.

"Hey, Job! Over here!"

I rolled my eyes. Sitting on one of the benches was Al, my fellow squad mate. He waved me over. I jogged to him. "Yeah?"

He grinned. "Guess that woke you up. Yeah, Jess wants us to meet in Rec L-02. So, start moving."

I sighed. "Listen, I need to head to the Armory for a new gun. Care to come with me?"

"Why?" He leaned forward. "You can get them in a lot of places."

"I feel better with one at my side." I shook my head. "Listen, if you don't wanna help, fine. But I'm going to the Armory, whether you like it or not."

"Fine, fine." He shrugged. "It's not my concern. But I need company, and all the others were on patrol. It's okay if we're a little late."

I nodded. "Thanks. Let's go."

We headed to the lift. It could ferry us to any of the station's six levels. We only needed to get to the fourth one for the Armory. I reached it first and waited until Al had entered before hitting the button. The elevator rumbled as we headed up.

Al twiddled his thumbs. "Shouldn't there be some cruddy music or something playing?"

"This is the Marines, Al. We don't have elevator music."

"Alright, just checking." He studied the control panel. "Why are there seven numbers on here? I thought there were only six floors."

"What?" I looked at the numbers. L-01, L-02, L-03, L-04, L-05, L-06, and L-07. I stared at it. "But there are only six floors."

"Hey, there's an echo in here." He shrugged. "Ah, well. We can ask Sarge about this later. Maybe Jess knows."

"Yeah, maybe." I tapped my foot on the elevator floor. This is taking too long. Then I realized something. "Hey, Al."

He yawned. "Yep?"

"We stopped moving."

Then the elevator rocked violently. I slammed into the far side, Al right beside me. Blood trickled down from my nose. I spit some out and stood. "We're trapped!"

Al opened his mouth to respond when the station shook again. I coughed as smoke filled the lift.

Al punched the wall and winced. "Ow! Not getting out that way."

My eyes darted around, searching for something to help us. I caught a glimpse of something brownish-green and round. I did a double-take and saw that Al had a frag grenade on his belt.

"Hey, Al, we could!" Another tremble caught me off, though not as violent as the last two. Al jumped back as a chunk of the ceiling fell down.

He pointed up at the newly-formed hole. "Come on, we gotta get out of here!"

I jumped up and grabbed onto the ceiling outside the hole. Al pushed me up into the shaft. I put out my hand and pulled him up. "Where should we go!"

"There!" He singled out a large door about two meters above our heads. "We can climb through! Come on!"

I clambered up the small holes in the walls. Al followed me to the door. I got to the ledge and held onto another handhold on the wall. "The door won't open! We can't get out!"

Flames spouted from higher up in the shaft. He glanced around. "Get down from there!"

I descended from the doorway. He reached up and put his grenade right next to the door, then jumped down. "Stay back!"

I closed my eyes as an explosion rocked the shaft. The elevator made a creaking noise. I hurried back up the shaft wall to the now-nonexistent door. Al came after me and we burst into a rec room.

The whole station shook. I tumbled up against the wall. Al clamped onto a pole and stayed. The rumbling subsided.

Al stood up. "That wasn't plasma that hit us!"

A voice boomed over the PA. "Prepare to repel borders. All non-military personnel to the escape pods. Prepare to repel borders."

Al's shoulders slumped. "Great. And we have no weapons."

I surveyed the room. "Hey, we're on the second floor! There's a weapon storehouse around here somewhere."

"Thanks, Job." He sighed. "Don't even let me complain properly. What a shame."

We headed towards the stairwell. I looked up at a computer room similar to the one I'd visited earlier. "Man, all these levels look the same!"

"Amen to that, brother." He ran up the stairs. "Come on, there might be some guns up here."

I trailed him into the room. A device on the wall slid out as we approached, revealing two SMGs. Al grinned. "Just what the doctor ordered."

I took one of the guns from the rack. I don't really like to use an SMG. One, they have an enormous recoil, two, their range stinks, and three, the magazine depletes in a heartbeat. But, hey, beggars can't be choosers.

Al looked at the door. "Do you know where the Covenant are?"

I stared at him. "Yeah, Al. All I need to do is pull out my handy-dandy notebook, and!"

He shook his head. "Don't quit your day job, Job."

"Yeah, well, someone needs to keep you company, huh?"

He shrugged and moved to the door. "If this is the second level, I bet Jess and the others are here. That's good."

"But what about the Sarge?" I took a deep breath to calm myself. "He went to the fifth level, to the computer lab."

"Damn!" Al checked his ammo. "This thing's out. Check yours."

I looked at the ammo counter on the side. A full clip. "Mine has one clip, but that won't last us very long."

He bit his lip. "Alright, let's see!"

I went over to one of the computers. Several brightly-lit keys flashed on its surface. I scratched my head. "One of these should bring up a map!"

I pressed a button. The screen lit up. Letters scrolled across it:

ACCESS DENIEDâ€|ACCESS DENIEDâ€|ACCESS DENIEDâ€|

Al walked up behind me. "It's all right, we can find our way."

I nodded and started to head to the door. Al ran up to open it.

Just as he got there, it slid open. Two Grunts came out, plasma pistols ready.

Al stared at them. "Boo."

The Grunts raised their weapons to shoot. I hefted my gun and fired a few quick shots. One of the aliens fell over, throat slit by the bullets.

The other Grunt ran in a circle, screaming. Al reached down to get the dead alien's pistol. I fired over his head and nailed the Grunt in its rebreather mask.

The alien crumpled to the ground, methane tank leaking into the air. I breathed a quick sigh of relief. Al looked around. "Well, this is getting nowhere fast." He glanced down at the alien weapon now in his hands. "Piece of crud. But hey, better than nothing."

It took us a good ten or fifteen minutes to find the weapons storehouse. I peeked in. Nothing but dustâ€|and echoes. :)

"Nothing." I stepped in. "I guess everyone's gone."

Al nodded. Empty racks lined the wall. He approached a locker and kicked it open. "Just dandy. 'Well, there's not gonna be some two dumb as hell Marines who get trapped in some elevator shaft. Better take all the weapons.' Damn soldiers."

"They were trying to survive." I got to one of the other lockers and started digging through it. "There's a bunch of junk in mineâ€|looks a bit like your locker, actually."

"Har har, very funny." Something clanged behind me. "Shoot! Oh, in the name ofâ€"Hey, I found a gun!"

I looked over my shoulder. Al stood there, clutching the M90 Shotgun and grinning from ear-to-ear. "I think this'll do."

Footsteps approached. I stood and held my SMG at the ready. "Sneak up," I muttered out of the side of my mouth.

He furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"Because, you have a shotgun."

"Right. Yeah."

I watched out of the corner of my eye as he headed to the doorway. His hand held out three fingers. "Oneâ€|" Two fingers. "Twoâ€|" One finger. I readied my finger on the trigger. "Three!"

I charged forward and nearly doused Frankie in bullet fire. He flinched, then seemed to realize we weren't Covenant and swore. "You

idiots, you could have killed me!"

Al jumped past him and unloaded a slug into an Elite creeping up near us. Frankie leapt back. "In the name of Heavenâ€œ! How'd you see that thing!"

Al loaded a fresh clip into his weapon. "I wasn't listening to you whine and moan, Frankie. Something that takes a lot of talent."

I looked over Frankie. The Marine had just shipped out from Delta-9, one of the few colonies still standing. He'd joined the squad with me, but I didn't know him well.

I didn't really want to at that time, come to think of it. He was kind of a jerk.

No, he was a jerk.

I sighed. "Listen, we're trying to get to the others. Do you know where Jess and Kenny are?"

"No." He stared at the dead alien near his feet. "No, I don't. I was going to meet them when the station got hit. They could be anywhere right now."

Al picked up the Elite's plasma rifle, inspected it, then threw it to the side. "Did you check the rec room where we were supposed to meet?"

"No, but didn't you guys just come from there?"

I nearly kicked myself. Of course! We'd been in such a rush we hadn't realized we were in the right room!

"Uh, yeah." I tried not to catch Frankie's gaze. "But no one was there. They must have left."

"Yeah, well, they can't be far." He kicked the alien corpse. "We can find them if we hurry!"

Al shook his head. "No, they might have gone down another hallway. Either way, we need to hook up with some Marines, and fast."

We all nodded in agreement and started down the hall. Al in the lead, me next, and then Frankie in the back with a battle rifle. I halted. "Wait. What if there was some more ammo in there or something? We could use it."

"You're right." Al turned around. "Let's head back."

I was just about to go back when Frankie shouted. "Contact!"

I wheeled back around. Two Grunts and a Jackal fired a few blasts at us. I dived against the wall.

Bullets lit up the hall, causing purple and blue gore to splash the walls. I poked my head out and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God there were only three of them."

An Elite rushed out. Al backed up and nailed him with his shotgun

twice. The dead alien slouched over.

Frankie fired a burst into one of the Grunt's head. "Never say it can't get worse."

I rolled my eyes. Come to think of it, I was a bit of jerk too back then. "Let's just move, alright? I don't want more Covenant finding us."

"Shouldn't we pull back?" He stepped over one of the corpses. "If the Covenant are ahead, we can get out ofâ€"

"NO! HELP! OH, NO, FOR HEAVEN'S SAKEâ€"NOOOOOOOO!"

We ran forward. What I saw next made me sicker than I'd ever been before.

Dozens of dead bodies littered the floor. Grunts were on them. Eating. The really scary thing: One of the bodies was still moving.

"OH, NO, PLEASE, AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" One of the savage aliens bit his arm. "NOOOOOOOOO!"

I charged forward. "Son of aâ€"

Al jumped ahead of me and sent the Grunt flying back with a shell to its head. I opened up fire on the feasting aliens. Rage filled meâ€|I wanted them to die, die for what they had done.

Rage is almost like a drug: Once you have some, you want more. It comes from fear, though. I guess I was afraid of facing the same fate as though soldiers. But it was too muchâ€|I kind of blacked out back there. Actually, I passed out.

When I came to, Al was standing there, a cloth in his hand. "Hey, sleepyhead. Tired of snoring already?"

I frantically looked around. "Whatâ€"what happened?"

Sarge walked up to us. My mouth hung open. "Sarge? But whereâ€"howâ€"did the Covenant leave?"

"Oh, they left alright." He rubbed his arm. It was coated with burns. "Took quite a few of us with them, too."

I sat up and noticed blue blood staining my uniform. "Oh. I guess I kind of went crazy back there."

"Yeah, you sure did." He looked back. "Frankie and Al said you were in there, shouting things you'd never sayâ€|You all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." My muscles ached like crazy. I stretched my arms. "Butâ€|how did you make it out?"

"I used the stairs. And had a little help along the way." His forehead creased. "I'm worried about you, Josh. Usually you're the most stable of the guys."

"Yes, sirâ€|" I sighed. "I guess the whole Grunts eating the Marines

thing kind of took me out of it. I'm sorry."

"It's alright, soldier. I just want you to be careful. Something like that could really hurt you next time." He sat down next to me. We were in a small room, no one but me, Al, and the Sarge. "If you ever need any help, you can talk to me."

"Yes, sir." And there was someone else I could talk to. Someone with a lot more power than Sarge. "So, what happened with the Covenant?"

"Well, apparently, they weren't satisfied with bringing us to our dooms in space." He stood. "We're going planet-side, boys. Get ready."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

He left through the doorway. Al stared at me. "You sure you're all right?"

"You know me." I rose to my feet. "I don't have to wallow in self-pity to get attention, unlike some people."

Al raised his eyebrows. "Was that an insult, Job?"

I smiled. "I don't know. Did it sound like one?"

(Sorry if I didn't go in-depth in this one. It may have gotten confusing with the whole 'prequel' thing, but don't worry: The next story will be set in the present. Or at the time of the first chapter. You get the idea.)

_(Please R&R! _i•Š

3. Troika Redux

I hate the beach. Always have, and always will. Ever since I first visited the hot sands when I was five, I never wanted to go back. The sand was so hot it burnt my feet, the water got in my mouth, and it took forever to get clean afterwards.

Of course, all these problems came floating back as I neared death.

We were trapped. Even if we could defeat the Covenant ground forces closing in, they could still gun us down with their Ghosts. I hated just lying there, thinking about my death.

Al crouched near the opening. He held two SMGs at the ready. I never thought a normal soldier could dual-wield the fierce gun, but hey, I wasn't about to point this out. He peeked out and then stuck his head back in to avoid plasma fire. "On three, we go."

I nodded. My right leg throbbed, a consequence of not moving it for so long. Cough sat behind me. I looked back at him. "You ready?"

He nodded and slapped a fresh clip into his rifle. I turned back to Al. "Let's go."

"Party time." He motioned to the door. "One!" I started to pray silently. "Two!" The plasma fire stopped. "Three!"

We jumped out. I fired a burst from my BR55 Rifle straight into a Grunt's neck. Al filled the air with bullets. Plasma whizzed by my head, causing the air to heat. I kept pressing the trigger, firing off shots until my magazine emptied.

It was all over within a few seconds.

One dead Elite, three dead Grunts, and an unfortunate Jackal who had made the mistake of charging us. I wiped my brow and was about to ask Al for ammo when more plasma slammed into the ground next to us.

A couple of Ghosts zoomed towards us. I jumped back to the Pelican as they came whizzing by. Al dropped his guns and dove back into the dropship's hull. "Keep them busy!"

Sure, give us the easy job.

There were three Ghosts. They swooped in and out of each other, like some choreographed dance team. Me and Cough avoided the crisscrossing streams of plasma. I jumped onto one of the Pelican's sunken wings and climbed higher to avoid the enemies.

Al finally emerged from the hole. He chunked something at one of the Ghosts. The object exploded, sending the alien vehicle and its driver tumbling end over end. I watched as the other two Ghosts backed away.
Thank God for frag grenades.

Cough climbed up with me. We stared at Al, who was quickly running out of grenades. Cough took aim with his battle rifle and fired.

A three-round burst hit one of the Ghost pilots, an Elite. It just dissipated on his energy shield, but it got him distracted for a few seconds.

All the time Al needed.

A second Ghost spun around, its driver incapacitated. The third Ghost charged, nearly splattering Al into nothing. I pressed down the trigger of my rifle, but just got a click. Dang!

Al dodged the Ghost's second rush. I jumped down from my position and, like a total idiot, started waving my arms. "Hey, chicken, afraid of us!"

The Ghost fired its guns, vaporizing the sand near my feet. I stumbled back and fell. The bandage on my leg slipped off.

Three bullets, perfectly aimed, hit the Ghost in a small, circular part near its driver. It exploded, sending the Elite flying forward. Cough doused the Elite in bursts until it too fell.

I tried to rise, but my leg still hurt. "Thank God we got those guys."

"Don't get giddy yet, Job." Al knelt down next to me. "Wow, dÃ©jÃ vu. Let's get back up to the cliff. Maybe those buildings we found earlier can give us some cover."

Cough bent over, hacking louder than his rifle. I smiled. "Man, this is has got to be the greatest troika in history. Don't you agree, Al?"

He returned my grin. "Of course."

After being patched up again, I headed with the others up the steep slope. I almost collapsed a couple times, but was able to stay standing.

It took us a good fifteen minutes to get back up. The ever-familiar forest greeted us as we started the long journey back to the structures.

I stopped. "Hey, Al. Do you think that's the only set of structures? I mean, could whatever built those have built some more ones?"

He turned around. "You're right. Maybe we'll stumble on something going the other way."

We traveled in the opposite direction. Strange birds glided over my head, sending calls radiating through the air. I flinched as pain ran up my leg. The wound was getting worse; it was so stiff I could barely walk. I kept up with the others, though.

We journeyed in silence. Trees extended farther than I could see, blocking out the sun's rays. Shadows grew longer as we made our way along the steep cliff. Al shook his head.

"This isn't right." He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. I halted as well and followed his eyes. Nothing. "Something isn't right. Why would the Covenant send an advance team and then abandon this place completely?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it was a scout force."

"But we ran into a lot of them back there. Something just isn't right."

I nodded. "That, and the fact that the ground dried up quicker than it should."

"Maybe this ring thing has dry cleaners." He chuckled at his own joke. "Yeah, that was a bad one. But I really don't care about that right now. Let's just move."

So we did. Another ten minutes later, and the landscape hadn't changed at all. I sighed. "You know, a change of scenery would be nice. If you walk for a few miles on Earth, will you see the same land?"

"Maybe on the highways." Al seated himself next to a tree. "I'm beat. Let's rest for a sec."

"Alright." I kneeled down next to him. "Did you get any water from the Pelican?"

"Yeah, I filled up my canteen." He took the water carrier from his belt and handed it to me. "There wasn't much in there. Try not to

gulp it all down."

I sipped the water, suddenly remembering how parched I was. It felt warm in my mouth and left a salty aftertaste. In other words, the best water ever.

We started up again. Cough headed our group. He suddenly came to a halt and put up a hand. I hefted my battle rifle and waited.

Something rustled in the brush. Cough crouch-walked forward. I copied him and headed towards the bushes.

An Elite burst from the plant life. I fired, missing him by about a mile. Cough slowly backed up, taking shots at the Elite every couple seconds. The alien charged, its plasma rifle glowing. Al doused him with SMG fire, sending purple gore splattering onto the ground.

I cried out as my leg gave way, sending me tumbling towards the cliff. Something stopped me right at the edge.

I looked back. Al and Cough were holding on to me, struggling to pull me back. I mustered every bit of energy left in my body and rolled away from the thousand-foot drop.

Al slung me over his shoulder. I tried to get off, but he grabbed me tight. I listened to his terse breathing. "I'm not gonna let you die, Josh. I'm not."

Pain reverberated through my leg. "I'm okay." Alright, I lied to him. But I didn't know anything else to say.

"No. I'm carrying you, okay?"

Al jogged along the cliffside, jostling me up and down. I found myself clinging to him just to hang on.

Finally, the trees ended up ahead. I silently thanked God for the break in landscape. And then I realized that Al had come to a halt as well.

He set me down. I stared at his sweaty face. "What happened?"

His breath came in gasps. He bent over, putting his hands on his knees. "The cliff's it ended. We're at a dead end."

I tried to stand but my right leg protested. I lay down on the grass. "Can we go into the forest?"

"Maybe." He took a deep breath and stopped panting. "Listen, your leg's bad and I'm out of any biofoam. Everything else I have is some pain medicine."

The bandage on my leg was soaked with red. I ripped it off to see that the bleeding had died down a bit. "Al, I think I need a new one of these."

He glanced down at the blood-soaked cloth. "Crap!" His foot kicked the dirt. "Looks like we don't have many choices. Let's get you standing, and then we can head out."

My mind wandered as Al patched up the wound. Were we destined to a life of running around, trying to find nonexistent hope? And why was I always asking myself really stupid questions?

God, please turn this around. I stared at the new bandage on my leg. "Thanks, Al."

"Hey, it's not a problem." He held out a hand. I took it and used it to hoist myself up. He shrugged. "Tell me if your leg gets really bad, okay?"

My stomach grumbled. I sighed. Just another reminder of the mess we were in. "Do you have any rations?"

"This." He held out a standard UNSC nutrition pack. "It's not much. We're going to have to find some stuff, and quick."

"So basically it's hopeless, huh?"

"No, it was already hopeless. Now it's just desperate." He patted me on the back. "But hey, we'll get through this. You are the positive one, after all."

A thin smile crossed my lips. "Then I guess I better start playing my part."

"Agreed. Come on, let's get moving."

We moved forward, guns ready. I traveled behind Al, with Cough on my right side. My stomach growled again. I shrugged it off. We'll get some food soon.

I just hoped I was right.

A sudden gunshot made me drop to my knees. I peeked up to see Al and Cough, tense and still as statues. Al glanced at me. "Stay down."

I didn't feel like arguing with him.

The two crept forward. Al kept his rifle trained on the bushes, while Cough swiveled this way and that, surveying the entire area. I slowly rose to a standing position, careful not to make too much noise. Then another gunshot tore through the air, causing me to flinch. Another one followed. And another. And another.

Al stared at Cough, who nodded. Al took a deep breath and then put two fingers to his mouth.

He let out a sharp whistle.

Something moved in the brush. I raised my gun and wrapped my finger around the trigger.

A person burst through the trees. His normal green uniform was coated with blue and purple blood, along with his face. But the shotgun in his hands and the cap gave it away.

Al relaxed. "Well, howdy, Sarge. How you doin'?"

"The same as you, I suppose." Sarge loaded a fresh bullet into his shotgun. "Listen, I doubt those sons of guns were alone. Have you faced any Covenant?"

"Plenty, sir. Same for you?"

"Of course." His characteristic white smile cut through the grime on his face. "I think the fun's just beginning, boys."

I nodded. "We're ready, sir."

And we were.

(This chapter was shorter than the others, and took me a little while longer to write because I was working on other projects. The next chapter will either be about the fight on New Mombassa, or a continuation of the present story. Until then, see you next time.)

4. Memories and Mombassa

I pulled the trigger.

A single three-round burst tore through the Grunt's throat, knocking him to the ground. More gunfire came from my left and right as the squad mopped up the Covenant forces.

Al rolled under an extended stretch of plasma from a very angry Elite. "Hey, fish head, why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

A shotgun slug overloaded the alien's shields and sent him to the forest floor. Sarge cocked his weapon. "Actions speak louder than words, soldier."

Al responded by embedding a Jackal's neck with a dozen bullets. "Acknowledged, sir."

I surveyed the area. No more enemies. The adrenaline rush slowly subsided, and I noticed the stiffness in my leg again. Sarge must have seen my limp, because he turned to face me, frowning. "You all right, soldier?"

I was taught from a very early age not to lie. "I'm not a hundred percent, sir, but combat ready." I winced as yet another stab of pain hit my knee. "Good to fight, sir."

Sarge saw right through that, of course. "Don't play with me, private. You need help, and as soon as we get out of here and somewhere safe, I'm going to make you get that leg checked." He shook his head. "I always told you Marines, never roll up your pants."

I nodded, the events of the Pelican ride flashing through my mind. I'd rolled up my left pant leg to show Frankie the bruise I'd gotten back at Mombassa. Then, being somewhat of a perfectionist, I had the right one rolled up to just above my knee too. I had just put down the left one when we got hit.

Though having some cloth in between my skin and a sharp piece of

metal probably wouldn't have helped much anyway.

"Hang on, sir." Al backed up to us, gun still held at the ready. "I think we have company."

Something rustled the trees. I moved into my ready stance, eyes watching the forest. Then the trees parted and something rushed past us. It was just a blur; I didn't get a good look at it.

The stampede hit.

Creatures charged past right in front of our eyes, collapsing trees as they passed. They looked like someone's depiction of a Stegosaur, except they ran on two legs, had a beaked mouth, and the spines on its back almost looked more like fingers or tentacles than spikes.

I stared in awe as the animals disappeared into the deep foliage. Sarge shook his head. "Now that isn't something you see everyday." He motioned with his head at the path the creatures had made. "The Covenant must give those things a wide berth, so I think if we follow them we'll be safe. Plus the path's already clear."

I nodded. We headed down the trail of downtrodden flora. Cough kept our six, while Al and me stayed up front with Sarge.

"So, Sarge." Al turned to the shotgun-wielding Marine. "Where's Jess?"

"I don't know. She's still missing, along with Frankie and Ken."

I looked at Al. He sighed. "Actually, sir, Frankie and Ken aren't missing. We found their bodies with the Pelican."

Sarge nodded. "I was afraid they didn't make it. Did you get their tags? How about supplies?"

"Yes on the first question. There wasn't much left in the bird, all the stuff must have been knocked out when we crashed. Does your radio work, sir?"

"Unfortunately, no."

A sudden noise came from the side of the path. I froze. Al glanced back at me. "What's wrong?"

"I heardâ€"" Footsteps interrupted me again. I whirled around. "There's something here."

Sarge held his weapon at the ready. We stood, waiting. Sweat dripped down from my forehead, stinging my eyes.

It happened as soon as I blinked.

I opened my eyes to see a dead Elite lying on the ground. The Sarge stood over it, his shotgun smoking. I whistled. "Wow."

"Those filthy littleâ€"they're everywhere around here!" He loaded a fresh bullet into his gun. "Let's move Marines. Double-time."

We set out back down the trail. It finally opened up way away,

showing long plains of grass. My leg didn't stiffen as much on the run.

More noises. We kept on going. I glanced up and realized that the sun was already setting. Great. Night.

At last we exited the forest. I gazed at the starry, half-lit sky.

Someone patted me on the shoulder. I turned to see Al, grinning. "Well, I guess we got out of that in one piece, huh?" He looked up. "Praise the Lord; I can actually see the sky."

"Hey, Marines." Sarge pointed at a small outcropping of rocks. "We'll head there for the night."

We passed those same creatures, grazing in the fading red light. I followed Al to a large, brown boulder. He took off his helmet, revealing sweaty dark blond hair, and sighed. "We're not going to get off this ring, are we?"

"Maybe not." I sat down with the rock at my back. "But we still have a chance. That's something Frankie and Ken don't have."

"Yeah." He put his helmet back on. "I'll take first watch, Sarge." He gestured with his shoulder at Cough. "And I'm sure Cough will be very happy to help."

Sarge raised his eyebrows. "You okay with that, Cough?"

The ODST nodded. I propped my battle rifle against the rock and then leaned back. "I'm ready when you need me, Sarge."

I didn't hear his reply. I fell asleep as soon as my eyes closed.

It was supposed to be Hell on Earth.

I exchanged a glance at Al. We'd thought the damage to New Mombassa would be a lot worse than what we were seeing. There weren't any fires or explosions. Barely a sound.

Like a silent takeover.

The Pelican shuddered. I tightened the strap on my seat and then turned to listen to Sarge's instructions.

"Okay, Marines. The Covenant have taken up a position at the City Center. Our job is to take it back. We'll be meeting up with Gold and Silver Companies along the way. Load your weapons." He clutched his shotgun tighter. "This is gonna be one hell of a fight."

I checked my battle rifle again. Not because it needed it, really I did it to keep my eyes off Jess. Well, that didn't work.

I glanced up. She sat in the corner near the cockpit, next to the Sarge. I watched as she slid a hand back to brush her black locks away from her forehead. She looked at me. "I hate bangs. I need to get these cut."

"They're not in your eyes or anything, though."

"Yeah, I just hate them."

"Hey, so do I." I grinned. She returned the smile.

Without warning Al elbowed me in the ribs. Hard. "Hey, buddy, all ready to go?"

I bit back the urge to cuss at him. But now Jess had turned to Frankie and engaged in whispered conversation with him. By the way they kept looking over at me I could guess who the conversation was about.

I sighed. I guessed Al found distress in the fact that with a squad of eight we only had one girl. He'd talked about Jess before, but I always thought he was pulling my leg.

Maybe I assumed wrong.

The Pelican shuddered. I shoved the thoughts of Jess and Al out of my mind. Those aren't going to help against the Covenant.

Clouds of dust stirred on the ground as our dropship set down. Ken, sitting in the pilot seat of the craft, unbuckled and gave us a thumbs-up. "Ready to go, Sarge."

I clicked the safety off my battle rifle and took a deep breath. Time to go.

We hit the ground. Sarge turned to Ralph and Rick, our spotter and sniper, respectively. "Watch for snipers."

Soon as he said his words a purple beam streaked through the air, missing Frankie by inches. I held the scope of my gun up to my eye, but couldn't find the enemy.

Rick's sniper rifle went off. I lowered my rifle.

Sarge furrowed his brow. "Ken, I thought you set us down in a low-combat zone."

"Well, Sarge, recon teams said this place wasn't hot."

Another purple beam hit near our position. Rick dropped down to a knee as the rest of us scattered, Ralph beside him. Ralph checked the scope he carried. "He's on the third building, left side. Top level."

"You could just say the roof, you know." Rick fired. A white line led to the bogey's position. Purple gore sprayed up from the roof.

We all dropped into ready stances. I kept my rifle up, assessing the environment as I checked for any enemies. We were in a small square surrounded by tall buildings. And I meant tall. Good for snipers. Bad for everyone else.

Sarge motioned with his hand down the street. We followed his lead, Frankie and Al taking our six. The walkway led to another long path, complete with small tourist gift shops on the sides. Various graffiti covered the walls.

"Heads up!"

The sudden yell made me drop to a knee. A weird-looking ship flew over us. We stayed silent as it passed.

Sarge kept his shotgun at the ready. "Phantoms. There might be more of them. Keep your eyes open."

I nodded. We moved forward again. The path forked ahead of us. Sarge held up a hand. "We'll split up. Rick, Ralph, Ken, you're with me. We're taking the right path. Everyone else on the left. Gold Company will be around here somewhere; radio in if you find them."

I trailed Al and Jess as we entered the left corridor. Frankie brought up the rear. An eerie silence settled over everything, the only sound the scuffling of our boots on the hard pavement. We kept moving through the narrow streets.

This place is almost worse than New York. Not that I'm claustrophobic or anything, but with the tall buildings all around youâ€|They sure didn't design this with a military battle in mind. No way to maneuver around, and like we'd learned, easy vantage points for enemy snipers.

Almost made me wish for that elevator shaft on Tampa Station.

"Down!"

I ducked. Plasma fire streaked through the air where I'd been standing a second ago. I glanced up to see a typical Covenant squad of five Grunts and an Elite. I tried to get a good shot with my battle rifle.

A trio of three-round bursts chorused simultaneously, one of them mine. Two Grunts dropped dead, with a third having a bullet-laced arm. Frankie doused the remaining aliens with his bullet hose (SMG). The Elite roared.

"Fire in the hole!" Al chunked a grenade at the hostiles. I backed away. The explosive went off, sending plumes of smoke and dust into the air.

We held out guns at the ready. The smoke cleared, revealing dead alien bodies. I checked my battle rifle clip. Still 33 rounds left.

Something moved. I kept my finger on the trigger. Jess held up a hand. "Hold your fire!"

Two green-clad Marines approached from the path. One of them yanked his head back towards the next open corridor. "Corporal Jones, Gold Company. LZ's back there. You guys Red Company?"

"Affirmative, corporal." Jess waved at us. "Let's move."

I tagged along behind Al as we followed the soldiers. The path led to a courtyard with makeshift defenses set up on most of the entryways. Marines hunkered down by the barricades, guns ready. Jess took out

her radio. "Sir, we've reached Gold Company, over."

"Affirmative. State your position, over."

"Roger that. We're in a large courtyard. Most of the exits are blocked; you should follow the path we took."

"Okay. We'll be there soon. Over and out."

She sheathed the com. "Corporal, who's in charge here?"

"Sergeant Gomez, ma'am." The corporal gestured upward with his SMG. "He's up top."

I glanced up and realized we stood under a large, overhanging building. Stairs led up to the next level. Jess nodded. "Okay. Al, come with me, we're going to up there. Josh, wait for the Sarge."

She left, with Al right behind her. I turned to Jones. "Anywhere you need me?"

"I don't know." He surveyed the square, squinting in the bright sun. "There are four paths leading out, including the one you came through. Just stay here. I'll go see if Sergeant wants you anywhere."

I watched him leave. "Well, Frankie, how areâ€" "

A sudden explosion cut me off. I wheeled around to see a ramp leading away from our position implode in bright blue clouds of plasma. The crate set there by the Marines shot up into the air. Grunts poured out of the new opening.

I filled their entry point with three-round bursts of lead. Bullets coated the Covenant's break in our lines. The aliens didn't even put up a fight.

They didn't have time to.

As the dust settled I made a hurried head count of our forces. Thirteen Marines including Frankie, so with me that made fourteen. And that still didn't count the Marines on the upper level.

I crouch-walked closer to the blown opening. One of the Marines near it peeked in. A plasma grenade came from the hole, almost sticking the soldier's face. I knelt down and then steadied my weapon as more enemies entered the courtyard.

"Look out!"

A blue streak hit one of our soldiers. He backed up, staring at the explosive with his mouth open.

I turned back to the battle before he exploded.

Two bird-like aliens approached from the hole, carrying shields. I fired at one of them, only to have the bullets dissipate on its hand-held energy barrier. _Great. Jackals._

"Fire in the hole!"

A frag grenade bounced onto the feet of the Jackals. They looked down.

Then they blew up.

Frankie ran up beside me. He skidded to a halt, hosing the enemies with his gun. I followed suit. My rifle made the annoying empty click. I flipped the cartridge release switch. The bullet-less clip clinked on the ground as I inserted a fresh magazine.

Two Elites charged into battle, one red, one blue. I drew a grenade, took off its holding pin, and then chunked it. It landed right next to the alien commanders.

The detonation killed one of the Elites and knocked out the other one's shields. Gunfire tore through the remaining alien.

I planted a head shot on the final Grunt's head. Dead bodies littered the square. Exhaustion plagued every muscle of my body. I relaxed as two Marines propped another box over the opening. Frankie slid a new clip into his SMG. "Is that it?"

"Don't ask that." I glanced up at the wall protecting the second level. A Marine with a sergeant cap stood watching the entire courtyard, a sniper rifle in his hands.

"Josh! Frankie!"

I spun around at the shout. Jess hurried over to us. "Sarge is in trouble. He yelled something, but it was all static, I couldn't hear his coordinates. He did say 'contact', so he's definitely facing enemies."

I clutched my rifle tighter. "Will Sergeant Gomez let us leave?"

"Iâ€|No. He won't." She sighed. "He wants us here defending this position. He also said more enemies may be in that direction and that it'd be a suicide run. Silver Company is coming though; maybe once they get here we can find the Sarge."

"What difference are four soldiers going to make?" I took a deep breath. Just calm down. Calm down. "Can't we find the Sarge?"

"The way we came in is being covered. Enemies have been spotted coming from that direction."

"So?" Frankie moved his shoulder in the direction of the defending Marines. "They can handle this place. And we can deal with any enemies, weâ€"

"Frankie. Sergeant Gomez is the commanding officer here, he can tell us to do whatever he wants us to do. And we have to do it. This isn't a democracy here."

He muttered something about "sunny britches." Jess shook her head. "You know, if I hear anymore crap from you Marine, I'llâ€|Oh, never mind. We listen to their sergeant. We're soldiers. If you can't

handle it, than you shouldn't have joined in the first place."

I nodded. Frankie followed suit, eyes narrow. "But as soon as we can leave, I'm going after Sarge."

"We all will." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Once we can."

I shut my eyes. Protect the Sarge, God. Please, protect him. I opened my eyes to see Al rushing in our direction.

He joined us. "Hey, Jess, their sergeant wants you on the double."

She went off. Al looked at me and shrugged. "Nothing we can do about it right now. We'll get the Sarge soon enough."

"Yeah, it's justâ€|" I trailed off.

He raised his eyebrows. "Just what?"

"Well, I, you know, I would rather get the Sarge than stay here. But it's an order. Nothing we can do about it."

"Yeah."

We headed over to one of the blockades. I kneeled down with Al on my left and Frankie on my right. "So, Al, what is that sergeant like?"

"He's okay."

I furrowed my brow. "'Okay?'"

"Yeah. Well, of course, to us he's not as good as Sarge; I didn't expect him to be. He's a good leader."

"So why is he just 'okay'?"

The ground shook. I grabbed the barricade to keep my balance.

Then they attacked.

Red plasma scorched the courtyard. I dived away as Phantoms came into view above us. Their turrets burned our position, catching any Marines too unfortunate to get away in time.

Covenant troops fell from the blue holes on the Phantoms' bellies. I whipped my battle rifle around to face them. An Elite caught sight of me and readied his own weapon. I fired and hit the Elite, causing its shields to crackle. Someone else buried the alien in SMG rounds.

But this time the Covenant held the advantage. They had us in numbers and momentum. I picked off as many as I could, but it wasn't enough.

Al launched a grenade at the attackers. He then grabbed me and turned me around. "Come on, we're dead if we stay here!"

I followed him as he rushed to the stairs leading to the main building's second level. We just reached the steps when an explosion

rocked the structure. I slipped and fell back to ground level.

Someone caught me before I hit the ground. I glanced back to see Frankie, his teeth gritted. I got solid ground under my feet again and leapt to the top of the stairs. Frankie came right behind me.

Marines stood at the edge of the platform, raining down bullets on the Covenant below. Jess fought with them. I darted over to the short wall. Al joined me, already shooting his battle rifle.

"Hold 'em!" A man with a sergeant cap flung a frag into the fray. It exploded, taking out quite a few enemies as well. I knocked out a pair of Jackals with four pulls of the trigger, and then a couple Grunts with only three. Metal clattered on the ground as I dropped my empty ammo cartridge and inserted a new one in its place.

The Covenant forces thinned. I picked off another Grunt and then watched as the last Elite fell. My finger ached from hitting the trigger.

The Marine sergeant pointed two fingers at the mess. "Segui, Darles, get down there and get the tags." He turned to me, Frankie, and Al. "You three, go with them. Secure any grenades or alien weaponry still serviceable. Stay ready; I doubt those Covenant's friends are far behind."

I tagged along after two female Marines heading down the stairs, Frankie and Al right behind me. We hit the square. The two Marines went off towards the dead bodies. I hunkered down next to some alien corpses. Blue spheres rested next to the lifeless enemies. I scooped some up into my arms, careful not to touch the orange oval buttons on the grenades.

Wouldn't be a pretty sight if I did.

Al and Frankie joined me; Al, like me, with his hands full of plasma grenades, and Frankie, with a couple plasma pistols, a plasma rifle, and even a needler. Al yanked his head towards the upper level. "Come on, this is all we can get."

I trailed after them as we got back up to the sergeant. I carried the enemy arms to a spot near the rest of the Marines' position and then dropped them on the ground. Al and Frankie did the same.

The sergeant (whom I now realized was Sergeant Gomez) inspected our recoveries. "Very good, men." He turned to face the courtyard. "Stay ready."

I moved to the second floor's barrier, next to Jess. We exchanged a glance.

My arms felt heavy. "Tough fight."

"Yeah."

I surveyed the square, not really knowing how to start a conversation. An almost eerie silence settled over everything, the only sound the scuffling of the pair of Marines below. I watched as

the two soldiers worked systematically, with both of them moving so they both checked a different body at the same time. At last they finished and headed back to our location, their arms full of chain tags.

They handed Sergeant Gomez the identification devices. He took them and placed them in a bag on his belt. Then he strode forward to stand in front of us all.

"Alright, Marines. You may not all know me, or even like me, but that doesn't matter. I've received word that Silver Company will soon be here, but until then, we'll have to defend this position. I want all of you ready and do_ not_ go to ground level unless I order you to do so. Darles, Edgar, and you, McKinney, I want you three sorting through the Covenant weapons. Distribute the working grenades, but keep the plasma guns where they are." He nodded at the square beneath us. "Everyone else, on the outer wall. Battle ready."

I watched as Jess and two Marines went over to the pile of Covenant munitions. Al tapped me on the shoulder. "Come on, stay ready, man."

I moved back to the fence. An occasional cloud of exploding plasma broke the clear afternoon sky. I shifted my weight. What are we going to do about the Sarge?

Jess rejoined us. I looked at her and then glanced away. Just keep your mind on the fight. That's where it belongs.

"Contact! Down low!"

I jerked my battle rifle to the enemy position. Grunts poured out of a new hole in the courtyard wall. Plasma fire scorched the ground around our feet. Our retaliation paled in comparison to our attackers' payload; we barely hit anything. One Grunt lay dead, but still others came through the opening.

A Pelican suddenly moved over the square, tearing through the Covenant forces with machine gun fire. It backed up until its open end hovered over our position. Several Marines jumped onto our level.

"Sergeant Gomez!" One of the soldiers pointed at the new stream of alien adversaries. "The Covenant has this whole place surrounded! It's recommended you get your forces out of here!"

"Agreed, Marine." The sergeant crouched low, raining down bullets on our foes. "In the Pelican, double-time!"

Some of our forces got onto the Pelican. I stayed, picking off any Covenant I could. A small group of them ran towards the stairs. I fired at them until they passed out of my vision.

Soon only Sergeant Gomez, I, and another Marine remained outside the Pelican. Gomez waved me on. "Get in there, Marine!"

I moved over to the dropship and leapt in. The other Marine joined me, but Sergeant Gomez still fought. Covenant reached the level. I glanced over my shoulder and realized something.

There wasn't enough room on the Pelican for all of us.

I jumped off. My feet hit the ground next to Sergeant Gomez. "There isn't enough room on the Pelican, sir!" I faced the onslaught, firing away. "We can't all make it!"

I kept pulling the trigger of my gun, knocking any alien that crossed my line of fire to the ground. Then time slowed down.

I thought I heard Sergeant Gomez yell something. I don't know what he said, but suddenly I found myself on the Pelican's floor. I watched in horror as the floor under me began to move, leaving the sergeant stranded with the Covenant.

The dropship churned under us as time sped up again. Someone hauled me up to the bench, squeezing me in among the Marines. I gasped. "We left him! We left him!"

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see Jess. "But we left him. He's going toâ€¦he's going toâ€¦"

I glanced around. Many of the Marines seemed to be fighting back tears. I blinked to stop myself from crying.

Jess bent down next to me. "He gave the order. We had to go. We had to go."

I swallowed. The sorrow washed over my body, filling me with guilt. "I should have stayed, I should haveâ€¦" Then the cold wave of realization hit me. "I jumped onto the Pelican. He didn't push me, I jumped. Heâ€¦" Suddenly the memory of his shout came to me. "He told me to go, and I obeyed. I could've stayed." I lowered my head. "I could have saved him."

She raised my head up and stared into my eyes. "Listen. You did everything you could. He's gone. You couldn't have done anything to stop that."

"I'm no hero." I took a deep breath, and then exhaled. "I could have stayed."

"You have to let it go. You have to just let it go." She stood. "Pull it together. Sarge is alive."

I stared at her. "He's what?"

"He's alive. And he needs out help."

I nodded. The grief subsided, leaving in its departure fierce determination. I exhaled again. Then I noticed the small bag on the Pelican floor.

I picked it up and opened it to find lots of chain tags. Sergeant Gomez must have thrown it on the Pelican. I closed it and clipped it to my belt.

Better keep those close. I leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes. Don't want to lose them..

"Hey, sleepyhead."

I opened my eyes. Al stood over me. "It's time for your shift."

I rose to my feet, feeling the pain in my leg again. Al handed me my battle rifle and then sat down against the rock. "Wake me when the Sarge wants to move."

I moved over to where the Sarge knelt on the grass. He turned to me. "Doing all right, Josh?"

"Yes, sir." I stretched my arms out. A silence filled the night. I absent-mindedly brushed a hand over my belt. And felt nothing.

Panic struck me. The bag, it'sâ€"

Then I remembered. I gave it to Sarge. I turned to him. "Um, Sarge, do you remember during Mombassa when I gave you that bag of tags?"

"Hmmmâ€|" He furrowed his brow. "Yes, I remember."

"What did you do with them?"

"Well, I put them in the Pelican when we left, right before weâ€|weâ€|" He trailed off.

I stared at him. "You mean they're still in the Pelican?"

He nodded.

"And the Pelican, itâ€|itâ€|"

"Yes, private. I know what happened to Pelican." He sighed. "And I know what we have to do next."

(Note: I have no idea what in the world the tags the Marines wear in Halo are. I just guessed that they were chain tags like now. I was wrong, I apologize.)

(And I also apologize for the long chapter. I wish I knew how to write shorter chapters. Ah well.)

Over and Out

5. Man Down

"So let me get this straight. We're going to go out there, fight through enemy-controlled territory, try to get back to the Pelican, which we don't even know the exact location of, and then find these tags, which might not be there in the first place?"

"Exactly right, private." Sarge pointed towards the trees with his shotgun. "It is of the highest priority that we obtain those tags. And I don't want to hear you whining about it. Take that to the playground where it belongs."

"Fine." Al sighed. "But I know we're gonna regret this."

I looked over the three Marines with me. Sarge stood ready in the

gentle breeze, shotgun in his hands. Al leaned against the rock, SMG hanging loosely at his side. And Cough? The ODST kept watch for us several meters away.

Sarge turned to Al. "You're sure that tracking device is on the Pelican?"

>Al nodded. "Yes, sir. I put it there before we left." <p>

"Good. Okay, I'm going with Cough to get the tags. I'm sorry, Josh, but you aren't moving well on that leg, and two of us can travel a lot faster."

I bit back the urge to contradict the sergeant. "Yes, sir."

He glanced at Al. "Al, if anything goes wrong while we're gone, head down the path we followed to get here. Be careful. The Covenant may still be in the area."

"Sir, are you sure about this?" Al shook his head. "I don't think just you and Cough can defeat a whole Covenant patrol."

"I've done it before, soldier." He motioned to Cough. "Come on, let's go."

I watched as the two Marines secured their equipment. "Hey, Sarge?"

He looked up. "Yeah?"

"Godspeed."

"Thank you, son." He headed towards the trampled trees. "Let's move, Cough. On the double."

They left into the trees. I watched as they left, squinting in the early morning sun. "I have a bad feeling about this, Al."

"Job, I'm the one who has the bad feelings around here." He squinted at the morning sun. "Listen, what are we going to do while Sarge is gone?"

"Wait, I guess." A pang of guilt hit my mind. "I should have remembered about those tags. How could I be so dumb?"

"Hey, it's all right." Al put a hand on my shoulder. "You're worth five soldiers, Josh."

I looked down at my feet. "You're wrong about that."

"Come on, don't you remember in Mombassa? You single-handedlyâ€" "

He stopped. I glanced up. "Why didâ€" "

He put a finger to his lips and then pointed to a spot in the trees behind me. I turned around slowly.

A Hunter stood in the foliage. I stared at it as it raised its cannon to fire.

"Down!" Al shoved me into the dirt. A fuel rod blast soared above out

heads, hitting the herd of animals behind us. One of them let out a roar and they ran away.

I rolled in the grass as another shot almost decapitated me. Al pushed me behind a rock. The next green blast nearly got him, but he dove under cover in time.

I panted next to the boulder, the sound of the fuel rod cannon charging up in my ears. I made a desperate leap from my hiding place right before it became immersed in the enemy beam.

Al fired at the alien behemoth. It swiveled to face him. Seizing the opportunity, I implanted a triplet of three-round bursts into the Hunter's soft orange spot. It let out a yell and wheeled around.

Bullets flew from Al's SMG. The Hunter trudged on through the pain and aimed at me with its cannon. I froze.

Al jumped on the alien. It swung its arm, connecting with the Marine. I heard a sickening crunch and Al landed about a dozen meters away.

That did it. I fired away at the Hunter. I kept on pulling the trigger, even after the enemy went down and my ammo counter hit zero. I don't know how long I stood there; staring at the alien corpse, rage swelling up inside my head. Then I remembered Al.

I dashed over to him. Blood soaked his clothes and covered his face. He managed a weak smile. "Well, I guess this is how it ends, huh, Job?"

>I cradled his head in my arms. "Al, come on, man! You're still alive! You have to stay alive! I'll get you out of here, but you have to stay alive! Come on!"<p>

"Sorry, Job. I'll miss you, buddy."

His body went limp. Tears streamed down my face. "Al! Al!" I buried my head in his chest. "Alâ€¢!"

I felt it all rising up then. My hatred of the Covenant. My fear of death. The sorrow for all the Marines I'd seen giving their lives. And then that first day. Me and Al started out in basic together, we'd gone through trainingâ€¢ even ended up in the same unit.

"Why!" I stared up at the sky, the anger burning inside me. "You heard me! Why! Why did you have to take him! Why!" The sobs came again. "Why did it have to be him?"

Something grunted behind me. I turned around to see an Elite standing there. I locked eyes with the alien. My arm shook uncontrollably as I brought my battle rifle to bear. It clicked when I pulled the trigger. No ammo.

The Elite watched me, tilting its head to the side. I slid my hand underneath Al's back, feeling for his SMG. The alien lifted its plasma rifle as it said something in its alien tongue.

I grabbed hold of a plasma grenade. I pulled it out, making sure to hide it behind my back. The Elite centered his rifle on me.

I activated the grenade and threw it. It stuck on the bewildered Elite.

I had already taken Al's tag and started running when the alien exploded.

The clearing stretched on another few dozen meters. I dashed across the open expanse, praying that no Covenant had been with the Elite. I thought I heard something behind me, but I kept on running.

Finally I reached the forest's edge. I darted into the trees, gasping for breath. My knee hurt like something on fire. But I kept going.

My leg gave out and I collapsed in a heap on the forest floor. I lay in the dirt for what seemed like hours, with only the sound of birds chirping and me panting breaking the silence.

The adrenaline rush subsided, and then the shock of what had just happened hit with full force. I bit my lip, fighting back tears. I have to keep moving. I have to keep moving.

But my knee wouldn't let me stand. I tried getting up, but it failed to hold. Then I tried again. And again. And again.

At last I just gave up. I scooted over to a nearby huge tree and leaned against it. "Hold on, Josh. You're still alive." I took a deep breath. "God, please help the Sarge to find me. Help me to survive."

The fatigue and shock overtook me, and I fell asleep.

I kept having the same nightmare. Al and me were in training, running through the target practice. Suddenly a Hunter popped up from behind a barrier. I shouted at Al to duck, but I couldn't make any sound with my throat. I charged at Al, trying to save him, but pain shot through my leg. I fell, and the Hunter blasted Al.

I woke up. My hand instinctively reached for my gun. Nothing. I groaned, remembering I'd forgotten my gun in the clearing.

Great. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with no weapons, no help, and I can't walk. Well, this is just a dandy situation.

I struggled to my feet. My knee burned under the pressure. I put a hand on the tree to steady myself and then took a few steps. By some miracle of God my leg held, so I took a few more steps. Then I walked without any support.

I could actually move. A shout of jubilation almost escaped my throat, but I held it back. Didn't want any Covenant finding me.

Besides, it wasn't over yet.

It reminded me of one time, when I was a kid, I broke my arm. Of course, with treatment it got fixed up in a week, but still, I hated the feeling of being helpless, of not being able to do anything. Though I did get out of school for a little bit. I guess every cloud

has a silver lining.

But now I had no medical supplies, no weapons, nothing. I leaned against the tree and contemplated my choices.

If I headed back to the clearing, I would have a chance at finding Al's gun. But Covenant could be there. Comparatively, if I tried to find the Sarge, I could run into more Covenant. That wouldn't help.

A sudden ruffling brought me from my thoughts. I peeked around the tree to see several Grunts and an Elite standing nearby. I jerked my head back before they saw me.

Footsteps neared my position. I held my breath as something moved closer and closer to my tree. Just as the Grunt came into view I acted.

I grabbed the Grunt's weapon, flipped it around, and jammed it into the alien's methane tank. Before the alien could scream, I pulled the trigger. The alien died.

The Elite barked something in its alien tongue. I dashed away, the plasma pistol still in my hand. Plasma scorched the ground by my feet. Then a plasma grenade whizzed by my ear. I dived into brush as the explosive detonated.

More enemy fire tore up the plants around me. Sudden pain jabbed my left shoulder. I ignored it and ran.

The forest continued on. A path led towards an opening. I headed down the trail, my left arm limp.

I reached the opening and skidded to a stop. A chasm stretched out before me. I almost groaned. Oh, you gotta be kidding me.

I raced along the edge of the cliff. A sound of waves echoed from below. I stopped. Waves/ That means I'm by the beach, and if I'm by the beachâ€”

Another burst of plasma cut short my thought. I hurried onward, avoiding the brilliant green blasts streaking by. Funny, green plasma meant only the Grunts were shooting at me. Then where did the Elite go?

As if to answer my question, an Elite leapt out of the trees to land right in my way. I fell back, dodging the alien's swipe with its plasma rifle. I raised my plasma pistol and held down the trigger. The Elite fired with its own weapon. I rolled out of the way, feeling the heat of the plasma burn the ground.

I aimed with my alien pistol and fired. The Elite staggered back as its shields vanished. I fired several shots into the alien to finish the job.

I snatched up the Elite's plasma rifle. It felt light as I swiveled around and filled the air with blue plasma. The Grunts screamed. I held the trigger down, cutting through the alien soldiers. One rolled out of the way of my fireâ€|

â€|straight off the cliff.

I lay back, the rush subsiding. Sweat coated my forehead. I rose to my feet, bracing against the pain from my knee.

My left shoulder throbbed. I touched it and winced. Plasma must've hit it in the battle. Luckily it was a glancing blow; the burn wasn't that bad. I'd have to get Sarge to look at it when I found him.

If I found him.

I surveyed the ground. The dead Elite's body rested on the blood-soaked ground. I knelt down and took the plasma rifle and pistol. The alien weapons didn't clip to my belt easily, but I still got them on there.

My stomach ached. I remembered I hadn't eaten anything since we left In Amber Clad. I made sure everything I needed rested on my belt, and then plodded on across the cliff.

I passed dead alien bodies from where me and Al and Cough fought earlier. I sighed. I'd gone in a complete circle from where I started. Still, I couldn't complain, not if the cliffside led to the Sarge.

I carried on. A long time passed before I reached the path down to the beach. I jogged down it.

My boots hit the sand. I headed to the Pelican. I couldn't see the Sarge, but if I waited long enough he would come eventually.

I crawled into the crashed ship. Sunlight filtered in through the cracks. Frankie and Kenny's bodies still rested in the corner. I searched the middle section of the Pelican. Supplies littered the floor, and several ammo stacks had slid into the cockpit. But no bag of tags.

I bit back several swear words that came to mind. Sarge and Cough could have already come and taken the bag. Of course, that didn't bode as well for me.

Something panged off the roof. I crouched down, fearing an explosion. After around a minute I looked up. A single rock rested on the beach outside the Pelican.

I crawled out, and, safety forgotten, spoke. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Well, it's about time some Marines turned up on this god-forsaken ring."

A smile crossed my lips. I knew that voice. "Well, howdy to you too, Jess." I got to my feet in front of the female Marine. "Don't you just love the weather on this place?"

(A small note: I'm sorry it took so long for this chapter to get posted. I have so many projects that I'm beginning to get a little overwhelmed. Anyway, even though this pains me to say this, I'm going to work on finishing up some of my other stories before working hard on this one. That means that it will probably take a while for the

next chapter to come out. I apologize, and hope you'll still read this story. I promise that as soon as some of my other works are done I'll take this story head-on.) _

End
file.